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ABSTRACT

The paper presents an overview of the interdisciplinary team approach for providing services to multihandicapped learners (3 to 18 years old). The model was developed to alleviate problems encountered by educational personnel serving the multihandicapped in a rural state. The model incorporates a local and a state interdisciplinary team. The two teams interface with one another and facilitate delivery of services to outlying areas. Several specialists are involved in the team effort. The type and intensity of services rendered are dependent upon the needs of the individual learners. The paper investigates the effectiveness of the delivery system and discusses methods that may ameliorate specific problems encountered over the past 3 years. (Author/SBH)

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AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH FOR SERVICE DELIVERY IN A RURAL STATE

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AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH FOR SERVICE

DELIVERY IN A RURAL STATE

ABSTRACT

This paper presents an overview of the interdisciplinary team approach for providing services to multihandicapped learners. The model was specifically developed to alleviate problems encountered by educational personnel serving the multihandicapped in a rural state. The model itself incorporates a local and a state interdisciplinary team. These two teams interface one another and facilitate the delivery of services to outlying areas. Several specialists are involved in the team effort. The type and intensity of services rendered is dependent upon the needs of the individual learners. The paper investigates the effectiveness of the present delivery system and discusses methods that may ameliorate specific problems encountered over the past three years.

Introduction

Vermont is a rural, sparsely populated state with over 9000 square miles of mountains and river valleys, and a population of approximately 450,000. Because ninety percent of the State's 252 school districts have fewer than 500 school-age children and youth, it is difficult for each district to make available several kinds of special education classes. In fact, in terms of geography, population, and financial status many traditional special education delivery systems are financially and demographically unlikely.

In response to low enrollments of severely handicapped learners in school districts, and the limitations in available educational resources, the State of Vermont adopted an interdisciplinary approach to promote the development and implementation of individual educational plans (IEP's) for the multihandicapped. Several researchers (Beck,1977; Haring and Bricker,1976; Haring and Pious, 1976) have recently supported this approach.

State Interdisciplinary Team

The State of Vermont Interdisciplinary Team (I-Team) model incorporates a local and a state I-Team in facilitating the delivery of services to outlying areas. Various specialities that are invovled in the team effort are: special education, communication, physical and occupational therapy, medicine, engineering, and carpentry. The type of services rendered is dependent upon the needs of the individual learners. Vermont cur-

rently lacks the necessary professional and financial resources to have a local I-Team available in all districts serving multihandicapped individuals; therefore the State I-Team serves those areas of the State where a local I-Team is non-existent. In addition, it is the responsibility of the State I-Team to provide technical assistance and specialized training to all local I-Teams that may need such services. The efforts of both I-Teams (state & local) are coordinated in such a way that together they provide the following:

1. Increase the availability of interdisciplinary support to regions of the State where services are limited;
2. Provide interdisciplinary expertise to assist in the development, implementation, and evaluation of individualized educational plans (IEP's) for unserved and underserved children and youth (ages 3-18) who are multihandicapped;
3. Maintain and increase effectiveness of existing programs for similar individuals already receiving special education services; and
4. Increase the availability of local interdisciplinary and educational personnel to provide quality special education services.

The model employs a regional educational specialist (ES) who is locally based and coordinates services for a multihandicapped learner in his/her assigned region. The ES is trained specifically to the multihandicapped. The major role of the ES is to become a synthesizer of services for a multihandicapped

learner. That is, the ES draws on the expertise of I-Team members on a local or ,if need be, a state level to assist in the development and implementation of IEP's. If a specific region within the State does not have an ES assigned, the local teacher with the assistance of the State I-Team coordinator may serve as the educational synthesizer. The teacher serving a multihandicapped learner who is in need of interdisciplinary support will be trained to coordinate I-Team services. The State I-Team coordinator will assist the teacher in completing an initial assessment and organizing interdisciplinary input at a local or state level. Initially, the organization of a local I-Team is preferred because the teacher is able to receive support on a regular basis if the specialists involved in the case are within close proximity to the learner's educational program.

Process for Referral

When a learner in need of interdisciplinary services is identified, the regional educational specialist (ES) and /or the teacher and the State I-Team coordinator receive the parents' permission to assess whether or not the learner's needs can be met through an interdisciplinary approach. The ES and/or the teacher determines what interdisciplinary services are necessary with the input from the learner's parents, the teacher, and the information generated from the initial assessment. Following this process, the ES contacts those specialists within the region who have the expertise in the skill areas targeted for

the learner. The local I-Team may need ancillary support and technical assistance because experience has demonstrated that not all persons trained in a specific discipline have experience working with the multihadicapped. Thus the State I-Team may provide assistance in the following areas:

1. Assessment of the learner's present skills and needs;
2. Planning an appropriate educational program for the learner;
3. Planning strategies for solving the individual personal needs of the learner and his/her family; and
4. Assisting school districts in the determination of program placement.

The regional educational specialist(ES) or the learner's teacher, if necessary, acts as the liaison between the local and State I-Team members in coordinating the training and direct services which will improve the quality of the learner's educational program. The regional ES or teacher is responsible for coordinating input from State I-Team members if a local I-Team is not available in the area.

State I-Team Service Delivery

The State I-Team provides consultation and training, rather than direct services to learners in need of I-Team services. For example, the State I-Team physical therapist does not provide X amount of hours per week of direct physical therapy for learners. However, the physical therapist consults with the teacher and the ES in regards to the learner's program and/or provides technical assistance,training and support services to the local I-Team

physical therapist, when necessary. The other State I-Team members serve the learner and the local I-Teams in the same capacity. Since the State I-Team members are responsible to serve the entire State, it is impossible for them to provide direct services to all multihandicapped who are referred. The teacher and local I-Team members may receive support from the State I-Team in the form of training, cconsultative services, or demonstration of prescribed therapeutic procedures. Through this type of support system, direct services can be monitored to insure that the learner is receiving appropriate services.

The degree of involvement of the State I-Team varies according to the availability of local resources and the needs of each learner. That is, some members of the State I-Team may not be involved in a specific region of the State because local resources are available to the learner. In another region, a specific need (i.e. speech therapy) cannot be met on a local level and therefore the State I-Team communications specialist would assist the teacher and/or the regional ES.

The State I-Team has been developed for the purpose of out-reach. State I-Team members who have been contacted for referral purposes travel to the program site and provide support and training to the the parent/guardian, teacher, local professionals, or other persons involved in the learner's program. This outreach effort alleviates the need for parents, the teacher, or specialists to travel long distances to obtain clinical services. In addition, this outreach effort facilitates the interaction between local and State I-Team members.

Interdisciplinary Team Process

Upon completion of the initial assessment process, the information obtained is reviewed and it is determined whether or not the learner is eligible for services. If so, the regional ES or the State I-Team coordinator organizes the appropriate local specialist for assistance.

It is the responsibility of each member of the I-Team who is providing consultative services for a learner to conduct an assessment. The initial assessment procedure involves the specialist traveling to the home or school setting, depending on the nature of the referral. The initial assessment may be completed with the parent and teacher present or the session may involve observation of the learner participating in his/her daily routine. When all the I-Team members have assessed the learner, a general staffing is scheduled to generate recommendations and objectives.

This staffing may include the parent, teacher, the learner (if appropriate), members of the local or state I-Team involved in the learner's program. The regional educational specialist (ES) or State I-Team coordinator is responsible for coordinating the meeting and recording the recommendations generated for the learner's educational program. During this staffing, the recommendations are discussed, prioritized, and statements of goals and objectives are generated. The role of the ES becomes extremely important at this stage because he will serve as the liaison between I-Team members and the teacher and monitor the learner's

programs. These responsibilities include periodic follow-up on the I-Team's recommendations within the local school district and ensure that any problems encountered are resolved immediately and training needs are met accordingly.

The regional educational specialist is an integral part of the I-Team because he/she:

1. Provides immediate follow-up and consistent monitorization of a learner's program;
2. Coordinates the efforts of the State and local I-Team members;
3. Organizes and coordinates the personnel training necessary in order to provide comprehensive programming to the learner;
4. Develops proposals to seek funding for various ancillary services on a local level; and
5. Provides technical assistance to the teacher, parents, and other persons developing, implementing evaluating individual programs.

The development of a regional model to include an educational specialist increases the effectiveness of the service delivery system because 1) the area is more accessible to the ES and 2) immediate assistance can be obtained by the teacher. If a regional ES is not in place in a specific area, a State I-Team member would have to assume all of the responsibilities of an ES. Potential problems resulting from this action may include the amount of travel time necessary to coordinate interdisciplinary service and monitor a learner's program, scheduling of appointments, and the inconsistent visibility the person may have in providing services to a region in addition to the specialist's responsibilities within

the entire State. A regional ES is highly visible in a region as he/she interacts with local school districts and resource agencies (i.e. home health centers, child development clinics, etc.). The regional ES is readily available to assist in crisis situations which demand immediate intervention. Follow-up services and training of personnel are available on a consistent basis.

The Regional Model

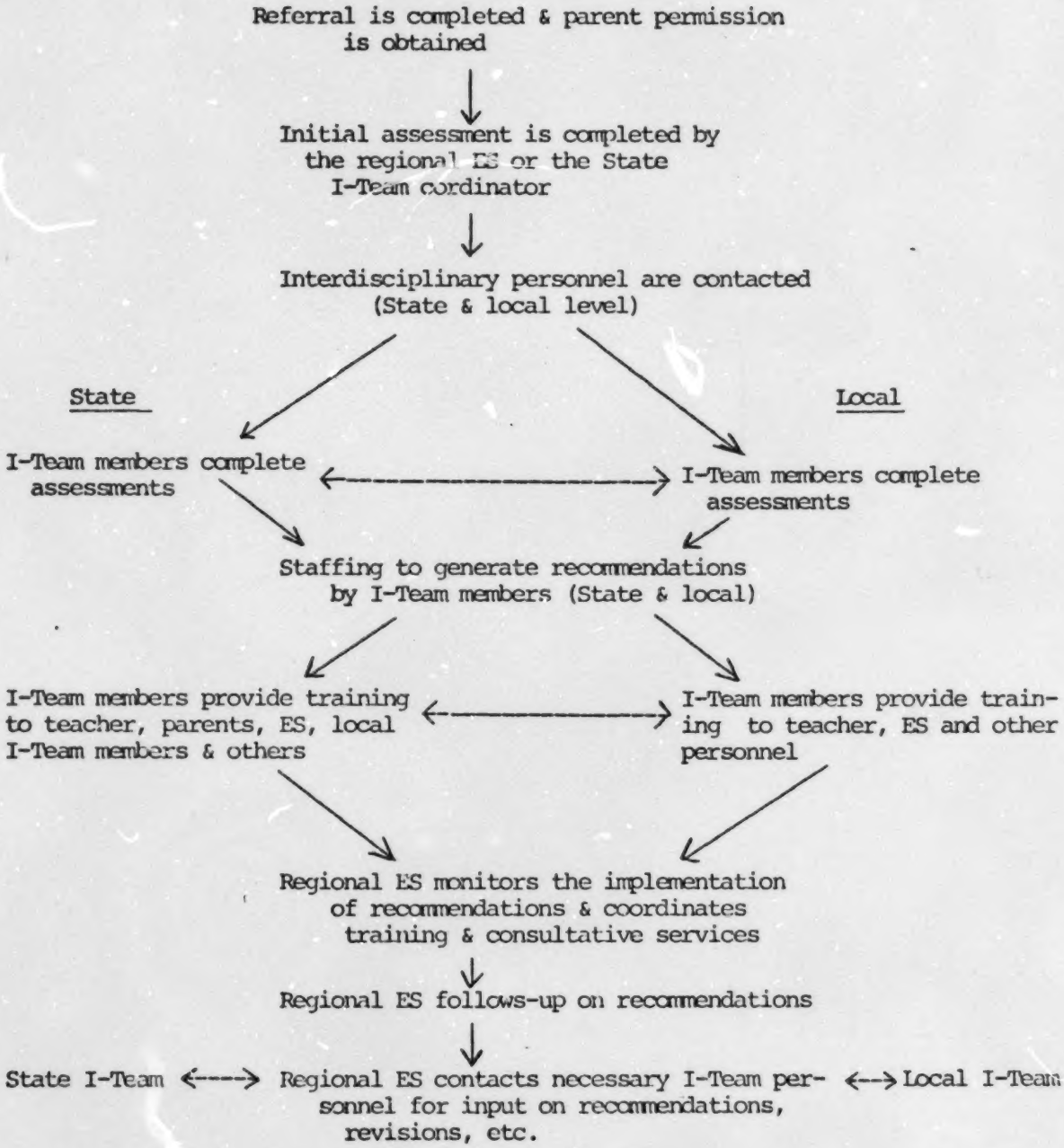
The development of a model with an educational specialist assigned to a specific region evolved because of transportation problems and travel time constraints. Although Vermont is a small New England State, the only major expressway (I-89) runs North and South connecting Northern Vermont with the Southeast region of the State. The roads connecting the Eastern and Western portions of the State are generally two laned highways which wind through the mountains and small towns. These roads do not afford easy accessibility within the State and are especially treacherous during the winter months which are approximately six months out of the year.

Figure 1 represents the I-Team model and the interactions on a State and local basis. The organization of a regional model coordinated by a regional ES has several advantages for a rural State. Some of these include:

1. Identification of a learner's need for I-Team services by trained specialists who have experience with the multihandicapped;
2. Immediate and continuous program planning and implementation; and
3. Consistent coordination of support services to local districts within a region.

Figure 1

The I-Team Process


Referral is completed & parent permission is obtained
Initial assessment is completed by the regional ES or the State I-Team cordinator
Interdisciplinary personnel are contacted (State & local level)
State
Local
I-Team members complete assessments
I-Team members complete assessments
Staffing to generate recommendations by I-Team members (State & local)
I-Team members provide training to teacher, parents, ES, local I-Team members & others
I-Team members provide training to teacher, ES and other personnel
Regional ES monitors the implementation of recommendations & coordinates training & consultative services
Regional ES follows-up on recommendations
State I-Team
Regional ES contacts necessary I-Team personnel for input on recommendations, revisions, etc.
Local I-Team

4. A direct interface between local and State I-Team members and involvement of professionals in several disciplines; and

5. Consultative services that are provided by local resource personnel who are familiar with the geographic area and may have some previous interactions with the learner and/or his/her family.

Evaluation of the Model

The effectiveness of this interd sciplinary effort is based upon a comparison between the needs identified statewide for the multihandicapped and the services provided by the State and local I-Team members to meet those needs. Program implementation, and follow-up services for the learners are critically assessed. Pertinent data such as learner progress and skill acquisition rate provide evaluative measures of I-Team effectiveness. In addition, each I-Team service consumer (i.e., parent, guardian, school district principal, teacher,etc.) are requested to complete an I-Team evaluation form. This form provides the following information used in the evaluation process:

1. Number of students served;
2. Types of services the I-Team provides;
3. Number of I-Team recommendations are implemented and attained; and
4. The amount of local I-Team support.

Issues in Present Service Delivery

Several problems have been encountered since the initiation of I-Team services on a State and local level. Some of these include site accessibility, contingencies for training, the exclusion of learners not involved in the referral process, organization of interdisciplinary personnel at a local level to generate recommendations, and parent involvement. Each of these issues will be addressed individually.

Site Accessibility

Several methods have an impact on site accessibility and may facilitate the delivery of services to small isolated areas of the State. The utilization of a regional educational specialist located in specific regions of the State where a need to develop interdisciplinary services exist reduces travel time. The regional ES is supported by the local school district which agrees to provide office space and facilitate the dissemination of information concerning the role of the ES to outlying areas. An interface between the regional ES and district special education coordinators would provide an efficient mechanism for the delivery of special education services. At the present time a special education coordinator is not employed within every local school district. Therefore the coordination of local services and resources can become difficult because no one person is responsible at a local level. If districts employ a special education coordinator, the ES interacts closely with this individual to coordinate services for a multihandicapped learner.

Another method that may contribute to effective and expedient service delivery to remote areas of the State is the telecommunications project which is based at the Center for Developmental Disabilities/University Affiliated Facility Satellite. The telecommunications project will be implemented in September of 1979 and possibly provide assistance to the State I-Team in the following manner:

1. Facilitate the availability of consultative services through the use of communications equipment suchas interact television, telephone service, and scanning equipment;
2. Assist in the development and implementation of of a communication system that would enable State I-Team members to discuss referrals while traveling to or from a learner's educational program;
3. Assist in the coordination of consultative appointments to aid in the training of personnel implementing specific recommendations for a learner;
4. Assist in the development of a communication system that would enable I-Team personnel on a State and local level to interact on a more frequent basis;
5. Assist in the development and implementation of parent involvement programs; and

6. Assist in the dissemination of information concerning I-Team services.

Contingencies for Training

Following the assessment of a learner and the generation of recommendations the educational specialist is responsible for coordinating the training of personnel who are involved in the development and implementation of the learner's educational programs. The training itself is provided by a local or State I-Team member who has expertise in a specific area. Personnel involved in the learner's educational prigrams attend the training on a volunteer basis. Therefore, if they do not have a commitment to the learner's education, absences result and the training sessions are terminated. An incentive program may facilitate active participation. The program could be supported by the local school district and provide a stipend or possibly a supplemental income. The incentive program may provide the extrinsic motivation necessary for an individual to upgrade his/her skills in teaching the multihandicapped. The initiation of an incentive program would demonstrate the vested interest the local school districts have in complying with PL 94-142 and providing quality services to the multihandicapped through the training of personnel.

Exclusion of the Learner

A problem that has been encountered in the I-Team referral process is the inability to provide services to other learners outside of those targeted in the referral. For example, if an I-Team member observes the learner in a group situation and notices that other learners could benefit from I-Team services, no assistance can be rendered until the referral form has been completed and written permission is received from the parent.

I-Team members may assist the teacher by providing information useful in generating ideas for local support in the classroom setting. The teacher may then take the initiative and contact local and Stateagencies and request assistance.

Assessment Staffing to Generate Recommendations

Coordination of the assessment process with I-Team members and the staffing to generate recommendations has presented some difficulties. Various methods have been identified in an attempt to facilitate the coordination of specialist's time in the assessment and staffing process. Advantages and disadvantages of each method with regard to the StateI-Team service delivery are discussed.

A. All members of the I-Team (State or local) are present at the same time for an comprehensive assessment of the learner's skills. This method allows each of the members present to observe assessment procedures modeled by the various specialists. Within this assessment session, they are able to share information and involve the parent in the complete assessment process. Reliability data among observers is possible within this assessment framework. A staffing is scheduled upon completion of the assessments and recommendations are documented.

This method is a very time consuming process and demands that each specialist coordinate his/her schedule with all I-Team members involved in the referral. Since the State I-Team is responsible to teachers and administrators through-

out the State, this factor complicates the efficiency of this method. Specialists cannot conduct an individual assessment and generate recommendations within this framework.

B. Each member of the State I-Team is resposible for completing an initial assessment prior to the staffing. This method allows the specialist flexibility in arranging their schedules to work effictively on a Statewide basis. The staffing involves the teacher, the parents, and the I-Team specialists. However, this type of staffing pattern can create an overwhelming situation for the parents. The parents may not feel free to voice their concerns or discuss their expectations for their child because the "professionals" present are the experts. They may feel intimidated and therefore are not inclined to contribute to their child's individual program.

An alternative to this type of staffing pattern can be employed that may facilitate parent interaction. The regional ES records the recommendations from each of the specialists and presents this information to the parent. The parent may feel more at ease with this one-to-one interaction and discuss their concerns and expectations. The ES would serve as the liaison between I-Team specialists and the parents ensuring that the parents fully understood what recommendations where generated from the assessment process.

C. State I-Team members may complete an assessment on a learner in pairs. The teams would be grouped according to the type of information that is needed. For example, the physical

therapist and the communications specialist may constitute a group because both persons are interested in the oral-motor abilities of the learner. This team effort is highly dependent upon the coordination of individual schedules. However, it does allow the specialists to observe one another and share information. Because of the small grouping, the parents may interact with the specialists in a more relaxed and informal manner. Recommendations could be generated immediately and parents could observe various therapy techniques or specific teaching/learning procedures. Recommendations generated by the teams would be shared with the regional ES. This enables the ES to monitor the implementation of those recommendations that were a priority.

Parent Involvement

Historically, services for the multihandicapped have beed custodial in nature. Only recently have efforts been made to provide educational and training programs for these learners. Parents have encountered innumerable obstacles resulting in frustration and discouragement because no one was able to assist them with the care of the multihandicapped child. The State and local I-Team has continually encouraged and supported parent involvement in the development and implementation of programs for their child. I-Team members have visited the homes and provided parent training in communication, motor, self-care and social programs for their child. Parents have generally been very receptive to the training. One reason may be the fact that the parents no longer need to feel that they are the sole advocates for their child. Other professionals are finally assuming an active role in the planning and implementation of a comprehensive program

which may lead to independent functioning in later years.

It is the responsibility of the regional ES or the teacher to keep the parents up-to-date on the progress of their child and encourage their participation in the evaluation of programs on a quarterly basis. If revisions are necessary, or if the parent has other concerns, the quarterly evaluation session provides the time for discussion.

Parents have expressed an interest in parent study groups. They feel that it may be helpful for them to dicuss their problems and concerns aboult their child with other parents who have a multihandicapped child at home. Having the opportunity to relate to people who are experiencing similar joys and frustrations is therapeutic and may provide insight into situations that may have otherwise proved very difficult. Through local resource agencies such as the Child Development Clinic or Home Health Centers, the regional ES can organize a parent interest group which meets at least monthly in the area. Often times, the interest exists but no one assumes the responsibility of organizing and scheduling the parent groups.

Parents participating in I-Team services may attend formal class sessions taught by members of the State I-Team or faculty members at the University of Vermont. The courses vary in content; therefore, the State I-Team coordinator or the regional ES can assist the parents in selecting a course or specific classes that maybe of benefit to them.

The regional ES or State I-Team coordinator is always available to assist the parents in crisis intervention and coordinate

othe I-Team consultative efforts when necessary. It is intended that the parent feel that they have the support and assistance to care for their multihandicapped child.

State Participation

A regional Technical Assistance and Evaluation person (TA&E) is employed by the State Department of Special Education and Pupil Personnel Services to assist school districts in budgetary concerns and funding for all special education programs. These persons work closely with special education coordinators or local superintendents who are responsible for coordinating special education services in their district. It is important that the regional ES and the TA&E interact whenever possible and share information because both of them are assisting districts in providing services to multihandicapped learners. The TA&E should be informed and kept up-to-date on I-Team activities within his/her region. Consistent communications between the TA&E and the regional ES will facilitate the quality and quantity of services to that region.

Summary

The interdisciplinary model has been in existence since 1976. Since its implementation, a constant effort has been made to evaluate its effectiveness in providing outreach services to the multihandicapped. Critical examination of the interface between the State and local I-Teams and evaluative feedback from consumers of I-Team services has demonstrated the effectiveness of the regional model for service delivery in a rural state. This regional model provides multihandicapped learners with comprehensive services free of charge. In addition, it facilitates the cooperation between local school distrist and their resources and State agencies that

may be of assistance. It focuses on the needs of the learner, the service provider, the direct care giver and other persons involved in the learner's total program.

Through the coordination of State, regional, and local interdisciplinary efforts, it is hoped that comprehensive educational plans may be a reality for all multihandicapped individuals throughout the State.

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